

Winter 2014-15: Central Oaks & Prairies and East Texas Pineywoods

By Bert Frenz

This report is reduced from ~154,000 sightings from 1 December to 28 February 2015.

WEATHER REPORTS:

David Wolf, Winter Season, Central Pineywoods, “The early winter was mild and this was reflected in the lingering birds and migrants found on the Nacogdoches CBC on December 14, but not long afterwards the weather turned colder and more of our hard-weather birds moved into the region. Generally the rest of the winter was chilly and wet, with a few notably cold days, but nothing extreme. It was noteworthy that even though it was not extremely cold it did not warm up much either, and as I write this spring appears to be late generally.”

MOST UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS:

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck – Although Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have resided in the Central Brazos Valley since the early 1970s, often wintering, the total count of 312 all in view at the same time as 3 flocks of about 100 each passed over Jones Road in Bryan, *Brazos* 20 Jan (Laura Sare) is a record high.

Trumpeter Swan – A delight to dozens of observers was a Trumpeter Swan, a Texas review species, first discovered at Lakeside Park, The Woodlands, *Montgomery* 9 Dec (Larry Carpenter) and viewed daily to 23 Dec. There are only 11 prior records of Trumpeter Swan approved by the TBRC for the State of Texas.



Photo by Florence King 13 Dec 2014 at Lakeside Park, The Woodlands

Blue-winged Teal – Scarce in winter in the central Pineywoods, a late male Blue-winged Teal was at Mize Lake in southern *Nacogdoches* 12 Dec (John & Thelma Dalmas). None others were seen until the first spring arrivals, a flock of 20, arrived 16 Feb (Louis Debetaz) at Kurth Lake, *Angelina*.

Cinnamon Teal – Cinnamon Teal are always a good find in the Central Brazos Valley and this season brought far more than usual. Two were at Richland Creek W.M.A., *Freestone-Navarro* 26 Dec (Ed Wetzel), with additional sightings through 14 Jan. Two were found on Finfeather Lake, *Brazos* 5-19 Jan (Ron Newhouse, m.ob.), one was at Country Club Lake, *Brazos* 19 Jan-21 Feb (Sandy Dillard, et al.), 2 were at a private farm in *Robertson* 20 Feb (Alberto Manterola), 2 were at Waco sewage ponds, *McLennan* 22 Feb (Dan & Leslie Doughty), and 2 were at Cox Cemetery, *Brazos* 28 Feb (Rachel Smith, Bryan Calk).

Greater Scaup – A Greater Scaup was seen 28 Dec (fide D. D. Currie) for the Richland Creek CBC and reported again 14 Jan (Andy Newman), also on the *Freestone* side of Richland Creek W.M.A. There are only about a half-dozen records for the oft-birded refuge.

Surf Scoter – An excellent find for north-east Texas and only the second or third record for *Marion* (the first being 22 Nov 1997 and 3 Jan 1998) was a Surf Scoter 21 Jan (Mike Dillon) at Lake O' the Pines.

Black Scoter – A first record for *Freestone* was a Black Scoter at Richland Creek W.M.A. 25 Dec (Mike Stewart, Wilbur Stewart). It continued to be seen almost daily to 2 Jan (m.ob.).



Photo by Will Jaremko-Wright 2 January 2015 at Richland Creek W.M.A.

Common Goldeneye – An impressive count of 454 Common Goldeneyes was made at the Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* 27 Dec (fide David Brotherton).

Hooded Merganser – An unusually large gathering of up to 20 Hooded Mergansers resided at a Texas A&M Riverside campus pond, *Brazos* 1-9 Jan (Bryan Calk, Rachel Smith, m.ob.), while 30 at the Tyler CBC, *Smith* 20 Dec (fide David Brotherton) was a high count for recent years.

Common Merganser – A rare bird for the Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* was a pair of Common Mergansers during count week 25 Dec (†Mark & Bonnie Edmund).

Wild Turkey – Nine Wild Turkeys ran across the road near Petteway, *Robertson* 14 Dec (Anthony Hewetson), the first record in over 41 years.

Horned Grebe – An unusually large flock of 28 Horned Grebes were close to the Lacy Point shore at Lake Waco, *McLennan* 24 Jan (Matthew Perzan).

Western Grebe – A Western Grebe was viewed from Lakeside Park on Lake O' the Pines, *Marion* 22 Dec (†Mark Edmund); this species has been reported at the lake annually in winter for the past 4 years, but rarely before.

Neotropic Cormorant – A massive flock of 3000 Neotropic Cormorants, absent of Double-crested, was studied at Lake Wright Patman, *Cass* 7 Dec (Mark & Joanie Hubinger); this count is higher than any previous reports for East Texas. This report follows on the heels of a trend to higher counts the past few winters. Amazingly, Neotropic Cormorants were reported in 14 north-east Texas counties this winter.

American White Pelican – Unexpected were American White Pelicans reported by 4 parties on the 14 Dec Nacogdoches CBC, with 25 flying over Nacogdoches town, 3 over the Angelina bottoms and 15 at Kurth Lake, Angelina (fide Ruth Heino).

Brown Pelican – Providing only the second winter record for Lake Somerville, an immature Brown Pelican was among a large group of resting American White Pelicans at Welch Park, *Burleson* 10 Feb (ph. Chuck Sexton).



Brown Pelican, photo by Chuck Sexton 10 February 2015 at Lake Somerville

Snowy Egrets – Snowy Egrets wintered at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro* 20 Dec+ (Ed Wetzel, m.ob.), with a peak count of 15 in *Navarro* 28 Dec (Blaine Carnes).

Tricolored Heron – Up to 4 Tricolored Herons wintered at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro* 25 Dec – 28 Jan (Mike Stewart, Wilbur Stewart, m.ob.).

White Ibis – For the second successive winter, White Ibis stayed at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro* 27 Dec – 14 Jan (Darlene Moore, m.ob.), reaching a peak count of 25, all immature, in *Freestone* 2 Jan (Will Jaremko-Wright).

White-faced Ibis – Again this winter, White-faced Ibis tarried at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro* 20 Dec – 28 Jan (Ed Wetzel, m.ob.), reaching a peak count of 130 in *Freestone* 28 Dec (Will Jaremko-Wright).

Roseate Spoonbill – Inland sightings of Roseate Spoonbills in areas usually too cold for their liking were 1 at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro* 28 Dec (ph. Darlene Moore, et al.) and up to 3 at Lakeside Park, The Woodlands, *Montgomery* 9-18 Dec (Larry Carpenter, m.ob.)

Bald Eagle – An excellent count of 10 Bald Eagles was compiled at the Gibbons Creek CBC, *Grimes* 30 Dec (fide Darrell Vollert).

White-tailed Hawk – Beyond its normal range and away from the Brazos River, a White-tailed Hawk was described at T.M.P.A. property 31 Jan (†Bruce Neville, Jan Horbaczewski, Alberto Manterola). A first-

county record for *Grimes* and only the 10th record for the Central Brazos Valley, this sighting is unique in that it some 17 miles from the Brazos River, but 6 miles from the Navasota River. All previous records in *Brazos*, *Burleson* and *Washington* have been quite close to the Brazos River.

Ferruginous Hawk – For a county that had no prior records of Ferruginous Hawk, the species made a surprising showing this season in *Robertson* at a private ranch ne. of Hearne and sw. of Calvert. An adult light morph was observed numerous times 10 Dec – 26 Feb (ph. Alberto Manterola, m. ob.) and an adult dark morph made a one-day appearance 19 Feb (ph. Alberto Manterola). In adjacent, *Milam*, a Ferruginous Hawk was seen off CR 259 24 Feb (Alberto Manterola), a 4th county record.



Ferruginous Hawk, photo by Alberto Manterola in Robertson County 10 December 2014



Ferruginous Hawk, photo by Alberto Manterola in Robertson County 19 February 2015

Rough-legged Hawk – On the Gibbons Creek CBC 30 Dec (Rick Bello, ph. Gayle Hardin, Anne Prouty, Terry Thibodeaux, Ryan Thompson) a Rough-legged Hawk found on Texas Municipal Power Agency land established a first county record for *Grimes*.

Virginia Rail – A count of 3 Virginia Rails on the Tyler CBC at Bellwood Lake, *Smith* 30 Dec (C. Ross Rickett) was a 10-year high, but more impressive was a count of 7 on the Richland Creek CBC, *Navarro* 28 Dec (Ed Wetzel).

Sora – A high count of 10 Soras were tabulated on the Richland Creek CBC 28 Dec (Ed Wetzel).

Sandhill Crane – A single Sandhill Crane was out of range over I-30 in *Bowie* 1 Dec (Philip Dickinson).

Black-necked Stilt – A single Black-necked Stilt wintered 20 Dec – 28 Jan (Ed Wetzel, ph. Darlene Moore, m. ob.) at Richland Creek W.M.A. *Freestone-Navarro*.

Long-billed Curlew – While a single Long-billed Curlew over White Creek Road, *Brazos* is noteworthy for 14 Dec (Laura Biddle), even more impressive is a flock of 43 photographed 26 Dec (ph. Alberto Manterola) at a private ranch in *Robertson*, where it is only a second county record.



Long-billed Curlew, photographed by Alberto Manterola, Robertson County, December 26, 2014

Laughing Gull – Four adult Laughing Gulls made an appearance on the Longview CBC, *Gregg*, only seen once before on the CBC (fide David Brotherton).

Herring Gull – Adding a new species to the Tyler CBC history, a Herring Gull was seen 20 Dec (Peter Barnes, Inna Smith) at Lake Tyler, *Smith* and at the same spot 5 were seen there 24 Jan (Brian Sanders).

Lesser Black-backed Gull – Almost a carbon copy of last winter, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull and only the second record for *Smith* was at Lake Tyler 22-24 Jan (†Peter Barnes, †Brian Sanders) and, coincidentally, 2 others were at Lakeland Hideway Marina, *Polk* 19 Dec (ph. John Berner) at the same exact spot as 2 years ago on the CBC.



Photo by John Berner, 19 December 2014, Lakeland Hideway Marina, *Polk*

White-winged Dove – White-winged Doves are starting to become regular winter residents around Tyler, *Smith* (Peter Barnes). The farthest east this season, doves were in *Gregg* and *Harrison* (fide David Brotherton).

Common Ground-Dove – Not often found in the Central Brazos Valley, a single Common Ground-Dove was included in the Gibbons Creek CBC, *Grimes* 30 Dec (fide Darrell Vollert) and 2 were at Washington-on-the-Brazos 14 Feb (Bruce Neville, et al.) where it is only the second winter record for *Washington*.

Short-eared Owl – On 3 Feb while on horseback, driving cattle with dogs, Alberto Manterola noticed 8 owls take flight adjacent to his *Robertson* farm. The exciting discovery of Short-eared Owls soon spread to the Rio Brazos Audubon Society as these are rare in the Central Brazos Valley and a first county record for *Robertson*. Some were seen again several times, including 7 Feb and on organized field trip 14 Feb (m.ob.).

Black-chinned Hummingbird – A Black-throated Hummingbird spent the winter near a backyard feeder in The Woodlands, *Montgomery* (Adrienne Cakik).

Red-headed Woodpecker – Continuing a trend in the past few years, numbers of Red-headed Woodpeckers have improved in East Texas and this season 18 were counted on the Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* 27 Dec, setting a 10-year high.

Prairie Falcon – A first county record for *Robertson*, a Prairie Falcon was at a private ranch 26 Feb (†Alberto Manterola).

Vermilion Flycatcher – A Vermilion Flycatcher is always a good find for the Central Brazos Valley and one at Cameron Park 11 Feb (Jimma Byrd) is only the second *Milam* record.

White-eyed Vireo – It was a good December for finding White-eyed Vireos in East Texas. Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* had a White-eyed Vireo 27 Dec (fide David Brotherton), the first in more than 10 years, as was the case for one seen 20 Dec (fide David Brotherton) on the Tyler CBC, *Smith*. And, another tough find was the 3 that showed up on the Nacogdoches CBC 20 Dec (fide David Wolf). Still another was on the 28 Dec (fide D. D. Currie) Richland Creek CBC, *Freestone*.

Fish Crows – Peter Barnes remarked “Fish Crows appear to be expanding in [Smith] county.” Pleasure Acres Lake is the place they are most often found with regularity.

Tree Swallow – A Tree Swallow as late as 25 Dec (fide D. D. Currie) was a surprising find for the Richland Creek CBC, *Freestone*. A flock of 12+ returned to Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine* 22 Feb (David Wolf).

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – Early was a Rough-winged Swallow 22 Feb (David Wolf), coming in with as a cold front arrived at Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine*.

Cave Swallows – Cave Swallows wintered in East Texas, including 1 roosting under the bridge at Alazan Bayou W.M.A., *Nacogdoches* 11-14 Dec (David Wolf, et al.), 20-30 seen irregularly over Kurth Lake, *Angelina* 24 Dec – 16 Feb (Louis Debetaz), and 8-25 at Richland Creek W.M.A., *Freestone* 28 Dec – 2 Jan (ph. Will Jaremko-Wright). After a time lapse, 2 spring arrivals appeared at Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine* 22 Feb (David Wolf), 65 at Kurth Lake 26 Feb (Louis Debetaz), and 10 at Richland Creek 27 Feb (Laurie Foss, et al.).

Red-breasted Nuthatch – Red-breasted Nuthatches avoided the central Pineywoods this winter (fide David Wolf) and were sparse elsewhere in East Texas. A few singles were reported in *Franklin*, *Freestone*, *Henderson*, *Jasper*, *Montgomery*, *Smith*, and *Walker*.

Sedge Wren – A noteworthy count of 8 Sedge Wrens were found on the first Richland Creek CBC 12 Dec (Ed Wetzel) in *Navarro*.

Bewick's Wren – A Bewick's Wren, a species becoming harder to find in East Texas, was seen on the Tyler CBC, *Smith* 20 Dec for the first time in at least 10 years. Two were reported on the Richland Creek CBC (1 each in *Freestone* and *Navarro*) 28 Dec (fide D. D. Currie).

Gray Catbird – Typically difficult to find in East Texas in winter, Gray Catbirds were reported in at least 10 locations in *Hardin, Liberty, Montgomery, Nacogdoches, Shelby, Smith* and *Tyler* 13 Dec – 10 Feb (m.ob.).

Cedar Waxwing – While a CBC count of 1769 was impressive for the Nacogdoches circle 14 Dec (fide David Wolf), it was overwhelmed by a single site estimate of 5200 Cedar Waxwings at the TX 147 bridge over Lake Sam Rayburn, *San Augustine* 22 Feb (David Wolf).

Smith's Longspur – A treat for most birders, a flock of 50 Smith's Longspurs were in an unfenced field of Texas tall grass prairie on Hwy 71, *Franklin* 9 Dec (Raymond VanBuskirk, Jeff Bouton).

Nashville Warbler – A stray Nashville Warbler was at Sanders Creek Ranch, *Lamar* 20 Dec (Evan Janson).

Palm Warbler – Noteworthy was a Palm Warbler 8 Feb (Betty Sue Dunn) at W. G. Jones State Forest, *Montgomery*.

Yellow-rumped Warbler – Considerably east of expected range was a well-marked Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler at Central Heights, *Nacogdoches* 8 Jan (Mimi Hoppe Wolf).

Spotted Towhee – Reaching a 10-year high, 36 Eastern Towhees and 2 Spotted Towhees contributed to the Tyler CBC, *Smith* 20 Dec (fide David Brotherton). Three Spotted Towhees on the Lake O' the Pines CBC, *Marion* 27 Dec also reached a 10-year high. Spotted Towhees were also reported in other north-east counties: *Harrison, Morris, and Red River*.

American Tree Sparrow – A remarkable sighting, and rare for East Texas, was an American Tree Sparrow well described 2 Jan († Peggy Harding) at a backyard feeder in Kilgore, *Gregg*.

Lark Sparrow – Three Lark Sparrows spent the entire winter in a Central Heights yard, Nacogdoches (David Wolf, Mimi Hoppe Wolf).

Grasshopper Sparrow – A first county record for *Madison*, largely underbirded until recent years, was a Grasshopper Sparrow 7 Dec (Bruce Neville, Laura Sare) at Lake Madison.

Western Tanager – Noteworthy was a Western Tanager near Kenney, *Austin* 6 Jan (Darrell Vollert), providing only the county's second record, the first being a wintering bird 30 Dec – 13 Jan 2012.

Black-headed Grosbeak – Quite out-of-place and rare was a Black-headed Grosbeak at a home feeder near Hwy 90, *Liberty* 19 Dec- 16 Feb (ph. Shelli Ellerbe).



Black-headed Grosbeak, photographed by Shelli Ellerby January 13, 2015 in Liberty County.

Rusty Blackbird – A relatively high count of 251 Rusty Blackbirds was tabulated on the Nacogdoches CBC 14 Dec (fide Ruth Heino), mostly at the MLK Drive Sports Complex. Elsewhere in East Texas, however, numbers were low (1-8) in diverse counties (7), except for 15 in *Harrison* 27 Dec (David Brotherton) and 40 in *Shelby* 27 Jan (Sue Orwig).

Brewer's Blackbird – Although once known in the central Oaks & Prairies region to occur by the thousands, not so recently. So a count of 505 on the Richland Creek CBC, *Navarro* 28 Dec (Catherine Winans, Julie Mobley, Sharon Lane) is noteworthy. More impressive is a report of 2000 in a flock mixed with Red-winged Blackbirds at McKinney Roughs Park, *Bastrop* 21 Dec (Louise Ridlon).

Great-tailed Grackle – Long expected to be added to the Nacogdoches CBC, a male Great-tailed Grackle made its first appearance 13 Dec (Charles Dean Fisher), yet it was the only report this winter for the central Pineywoods (fide David Wolf).

Purple Finch – David Wolf reported for the central Pineywoods, "This winter brought the best flight of Purple Finches in over a decade and they were widespread "in the wild" from mid-December through February, but very few visited feeders (m. obs.)." On the Nacogdoches CBC, 5 of 12 parties found a total of 51 Purple Finch. In the broader East Texas region, Purple Finch was reported in 17 counties. Statewide, Purple Finch was reported in an amazing 38 counties.

Pine Siskin – Pine Siskins made a good showing this season and were widespread. A high count was up to 100 at Tyler State Park, *Smith* 4 Dec – 6 Feb (Boyd Sanders).

American Goldfinch – In relatively high numbers, 1364 American Goldfinch were tabulated on the Nacogdoches CBC 14 Dec (fide Ruth Heino).

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